

# IV

## *Thy Kingdom Come*

*Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"*

*And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me."*

MATTHEW 11:2-6

Isn't there a comfort, a peculiar message in the fact that, after all the conflagrations that have swept through our wounded city,\* a sermon can begin with these words: "We shall continue our study of the Lord's Prayer"? We don't need to interrupt and search the Bible for texts appropriate for catastrophe. The words of the Lord's Prayer are immediate to every situation of life. The farmer can pray it at the close of the day's work and let it wrap him round with the evening hush of its great tranquillity. The mother can

\* This sermon was delivered in the choir of the Church of the Hospitallers since the church itself had been reduced to pitiful ruins in the air raids immediately preceding this time. The center of the city of Stuttgart was also totally destroyed.

pray it with her children in an air-raid shelter as the cargoes of death fly past overhead. The little child, experiencing the first presentiments of fatherly protection, the aged person, going through the trials and pangs of his last hour, both can say it.

It can be spoken by everybody in every situation, without exception, and we can see this with a special clarity in this hour as we gather together, a little bewildered remnant of the congregation, in the ruins of our venerable church, and begin quite simply with these words: "We shall continue . . .," as if nothing had happened at all. For if we take eternity as our measure, what actually has happened? Is God any less the Father than he was before? Do the overwhelming events which have just happened have no place within the Message or are not these events themselves a message in which God sets his seal, in terrors and woes, in destruction and fire, upon what he has always been proclaiming in judgment and grace?

So we continue; the Lord's Prayer encompasses the whole world, and therefore it includes us too in this terrible exceptional situation of life in which we are all involved.

Our generation has learned to see the face of death behind people and things. When we meet a radiant, erect person we know with a tragic certainty that everything can change overnight, and we think of the refrain of the old soldier's song: "Ah, the roses wither, every one."

When we, inhabitants of a severely damaged city, walk through a flourishing undamaged section, almost involuntarily our eyes perform a little trick upon us and suddenly the intact façades are transformed into horribly mutilated walls and horror dwells behind the bleak and empty windows. We know what a house looks like beneath its sleek surface, and it is shockingly easy for our imagination to produce this little inversion in which the ordered system of beams are seen as a chaotic confusion of bizarre and splintered fragments of wood. Again and again the face of death peers

out from behind the features of the living, and the shadow of ruins leers at us from the ordered peace of respectable homes. We are *cast upon the end of all things*. "All transitory things are but a parable," says Goethe, but now that we are really faced with transitoriness in the raw, the parable becomes too ugly and grotesque to be transparent.

In this world of death, in this empire of ruins and shell-torn fields we pray: "Thy kingdom come!" We pray it more fervently than ever.

We shall understand the full depth of this petition only if we remember that this kingdom is to be sought at the point where two lines of the Bible intersect.

The first line is a descending one, and it indicates that mankind is constantly living farther and farther away from God. Mankind began its journey in fellowship with God in paradise, which is, so to speak, the prototype of the kingdom of God. But immediately man's stubborn self-will asserted itself, and the departure from the Father's house ensued. What began as the protest of the individual, as individual sin, continued as collective sin in the building of the tower of Babel and took on the sweeping, tumultuous proportions of an avalanche. And if we are inclined for a moment to minimize this movement and assume that this is just a matter of human-all-too-human moral lapses, the history of idolatry in the Old Testament teaches us very explicitly that man in his self-seeking defiance has given himself over to the dominion of alien lords and tyrants, to whom he can surrender of his own free will but whose domineering, demonic grip he cannot shake off once he has crossed the boundary "beyond God." So this descending line leads us inevitably to the mystery of divine *judgment*. For God's judgment does not consist in his destroying the offenders with a thunderbolt from heaven; it consists rather in his leaving them to their own wretchedness and compelling them to pursue their chosen road to the end, and go through every phase of its terrible curse.

“God gives them up” (Romans 1:24)—he leaves them to themselves—this is his fearful judgment. There is nothing more terrible than the man who is left to himself. For all the instincts and energies which were previously directed toward God are now turned in upon himself, and he himself becomes the victim of his own self-seeking, his megalomania, the lie in his own life.

I believe that this characterization of God's judgment also provides the key to unlock the mystery of our apocalyptic world situation and also the mystery of the terrible visitation upon our own city.

In these fearful, fateful weeks many people appear to have become alienated from their faith in God; they begin to ask how he can “permit” such things to happen. It would be better, however, if they were alienated from their faith in *men*. It would be better if they were disabused of their fanciful faith in progress and stopped talking so emotionally and sentimentally about the “nobility of man” or the superiority of the civilized races. But since by nature it is obviously very hard for all of us to face this disenchantment, God gives us up to the foolishness of this drunken human delusion and watches us, reeling and staggering beneath the drug of idolatry, to see where it will lead us. Step by step God goes through the accounts with us, tracing the error to the end until even the blindest must see the bankruptcy he is facing. God leaves the rebellious man to his own consequences. This is the fearful form his judgment takes. And nobody can stop the deadly progress of this fate\*; he must drink the drugged cup to its last dregs. Then perhaps he will learn again, and then really learn, what is good and what is evil. But then he will know it in a new way, totally different from the way he knew it in that primeval moment when he reached for the forbidden fruit.

So much depends upon our recognizing this form of

\* The attempted revolution of July 20, 1944, occurred immediately before this sermon was delivered and was brutally put down.

judgment in which we are now involved. Only the Bible helps us to understand the present hour because the Bible knows the quintessence and the measure of every hour, because it knows the eternal.

Like all preachers, I have often felt compelled to preach repentance in recent years, but whenever I did so I felt as if I were a stormy petrel in a cloudless sky whom people refused to believe because they did not understand the signs of the times (and how could they when they were suppressing eternity and refusing to see the impending explosions?). They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, and laughing at those who were building their arks in order to withstand the floods and the judgments. And I would assert that now that the floodgates of heaven are beginning to open and the great tribulations have begun, we Christians can breathe more easily despite everything, because after a great and oppressive silence God has again begun to speak even though it be in a voice of thunder. But the heavy atmosphere in which we waited for what was coming has cleared, and the speech of his wrath is easier to bear than his silence. Again we see God's plans being realized, and the more the plans of judgment are realized in power, the more may we hope that his promises and consolations are also in operation and that the Father is no less a reality than the Judge.

So this first line in the Bible is quite clear: it is a descending line of decay, a line that ends in the terrors of a world which is its own destruction, as is envisioned in the last book of the Bible and expressed in words of our Lord himself (Matthew 24 and 25).

But alongside of it there is another line. And this line is represented by the *coming of the kingdom* which goes on simultaneously within the other process. In the same measure as men turn away from God and go reeling on in the drunkenness of their own misery so God's dominion on earth mysteriously goes on growing on earth—even now. The

manifestations of God's will are emerging ever more clearly and conclusively in the very midst of decline and decay, and God's sovereignty rules in power above all the rebels and usurpers, bringing his great and ultimate plans for the world to fulfillment.

We know very well that we must not think of this mysterious growth of God's kingdom (it really is a mystery!) as a kind of evolutionary development. We must not think of it as a gradual Christianization of the world which will increasingly eliminate evil. Such dreams and delusions, which may have been plausible enough in more peaceful times, have vanished in the terrors of our man-made misery. The nineteenth century, which brought forth a number of these dreams and dreamers, strikes us today as being an age of unsuspecting children. No, the coming of the kingdom of God takes place in a totally different way. In, with, and under the world's anguish and distress, in, with, and under the hail of bombs and mass murders, God is building his kingdom.

Perhaps we can illustrate this mystery in this way. I say "illustrate" because this is the only way we can set forth a mystery. We cannot explain it; we can only interpret it and follow out its main lines. *The kingdom of God is where Jesus Christ is.* But Jesus Christ always lingers in the darkest places in the world. John the Baptist had to learn this as he sat in prison, watching the collapse of all his previous illusions about the kingdom of God. He saw the judgment with great biblical realism, and he preached it with power. But, like many of his contemporaries, he doubtless thought of the kingdom of God, which was to follow the judgment, as an earthly, Messianic state of order and peace and prosperity. And now bitter disappointment crept into his heart, for this Nazarene, upon whom he had set all his hopes, seemed to be nothing more than a great preacher, only a man who practiced brotherly love. No cosmic revolution sprang up in lurid flames from the footsteps of this figure. He went his way like all the rest. And the dark, demonic powers were

still lurking in their hiding places—or even openly irrupting in sores and pains, in death and suffering, in wars and disasters, whistling down like bloody scourges upon those who sought in vain to escape the darkness and the shadow of death. That's why he sent the despairing message: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And the answer he received from Jesus was: "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."

And what this message means is that the kingdom of God appears precisely at the place where there is blindness, lameness, leprosy, and death. It does not shun any of these things because it is too good for the slums and haunts of misery, because only the distant realm of a golden city, a city above the clouds is worthy of the dignity of God. No, the kingdom of God is the light that is ineluctably drawn to the benighted places of the earth where people sit in darkness.

So when Jesus was asked when the kingdom of God was coming, he uttered those enigmatic words (secretly pointing to himself): "The kingdom of God is in the midst of you," meaning "It's right here, just as *I* am standing here in the midst of you" (Luke 17:21). The people who were gathered around him cherished the delusion that the kingdom of God would be an earthly utopia where ease and comfort reigned. But if this were so, then surely it could not be in the midst of them. For they had only to look around at those who were standing there with them to see precious little of that kind of utopian ease. What they did see was the whole host of human misery: eyes speaking the dull speech of despair, bodies crippled and deformed, the furtive glances of the guilty, and always the callous insensibility that turns away from the neighbor in preoccupation with its own troubles.

And right here Jesus says, "Here, right here in the midst of this misery the kingdom of God has come. For *I* am here."

God came all the way down to those who were heavy laden with guilt and misery. He squandered his whole heart upon them. And look, he also has the power to change it all! The kingdom of God is in the depths, and Christ is here too. One can never draw God too deep into the flesh, said Luther, and one can never draw the kingdom of God too deep into the misery of this world. So it is measured by standards that are different from ours.

If we compare the time before 1914 with our own, at first glance we may probably conclude that then we were closer to the kingdom of God than we are now. Apart from some serious exceptions, but exceptions nevertheless, there was a certain well-being, even a relative comfort among the nations, a certain prosperity among the colonial peoples, and there was peace. If one wanted to, it was really possible to live a peaceful life in this world "in all godliness and honor"—at least so we are told by the older generation. And even if we deduct a certain percentage and attribute it to a tendency to idealize the past, the remainder still seems like a dream to us today. Apart from a few stormy petrels, people of that time probably felt that they were already experiencing something of the "fulfillment" that seemed to be coming nearer and nearer. For that was the time when belief in evolution and "progress" was at its height. And today? Who can utter the word today without getting a flat taste in his mouth? Who can still believe today that we are developing toward a state in which the kingdom of God reigns in the world of nations, in culture, and in the life of the individual? The earth has been plowed too deep by the curse of war, the streams of blood and tears have swollen all too terribly, injustice and bestiality have become all too cruel and obvious for us to consider such dreams to be anything but bubbles and froth. In the face of that seemingly glorious development, have we not been hurled back to the bottommost rung of the ladder? Where in this world, which is increasingly being turned into a valley of tears, contrary to the plan of God,



can even the slightest trace of the kingdom of God be found?

And yet I am not telling Christians anything new when I say that we have learned more, and probably also experienced more, about the kingdom of God in the crash of air raids and the terrors of our cellars and underground shelters than those peaceful and almost utopian times of comfort and well-being could ever suggest.

Let me mention only a few of these experiences.

We know—surely we have learned it by now—that even the greatest creations of human culture are as grass that soon withers away. The mass graves that fill the cemeteries of our city in these days show the frailty of man, who is more powerful but also more suicidal than all other creatures. Even the forms and structures of the church sink and pass away. Here we are gathered in a ruin and here I am standing before you in my old army boots, because I no longer possess the proper clothes for services. But we do not say all this in any mood of skepticism or negative resignation. On the contrary, all these experiences have a place in the message and in the sermon only because they make us turn our eyes away from the passing and the relative to that reality against which the gates of hell shall not prevail and which moth and rust cannot consume. And if we are not deceived, our generation of death will have instilled in it by God a keener sense of what belongs to the transitory side of life and what has to do with God's eternity. Perhaps we are being given a new sense of proportion for what is relative, what are only liturgical trimmings and decorative accessories *and* a deeper awareness that in all these things there is hidden the rock of God, which for one man is the very foundation of life and for another a stone of stumbling, but which will abide in both of these capacities until the kingdom of God has come and the kingdoms of the world have passed away.

During these days and weeks in our city we have been led through the dark valley, and it does not appear as if our journey were at its end. But in the very midst of this valley

of the shadow of death we have also learned to know the rod and the staff and the Good Shepherd himself. The person who has gone through the nights of bombing with his hand in the hand of God, the person who has said to himself when whistles and sirens were screaming and the noise and shaking was at its worst, "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord," that person has experienced what that hand of God means with a reality that he has perhaps never known before in his life and in a way that he cannot forget.

In times of peace our evening prayer has its deep, sustaining meaning. (How should we be able to live at any time without contact with God and without fulfilling his command?) And yet we all know how often our evening commendation to God's protection had about it something Platonic and unreal. After all, the police would take care of our safety; the Watch and Ward Society would see that the laws were upheld; we had first-class locks on our doors; ambulances and modern hospitals were available in case of a sudden attack of appendicitis. One telephone call would be sufficient to set a whole apparatus in motion for our protection. How easy it was to be tempted to make of prayer just a kind of extra insurance that had no ultimate validity. But now the telephone wires are down, the hospitals destroyed, the Watch and Ward Society is probably bombed out, and the doors are shattered. Luther spoke of God's right hand and God's left hand. With his left hand he governs the world through the ordinances of the world. And now he has suddenly removed his left hand, and we are committed with an unparalleled immediacy and exclusiveness to God's right hand. Now we have to reach out for this right hand of God and let it be the pillow on which we rest, the watcher at our bed, the guide on our dark and uncertain path, and our staff in the valley of the shadow. In the ancient language of the church, the right hand of God has always been a special symbol of his sovereign rule;

and have not all of us felt the touch of that power—precisely in those moments when God seemed to be delivering us over to the power of men and the forces of nature? Have not all of us had at least some awareness of that circle of protection that God draws around us, which the powers of evil cannot invade, not even in the case of those children of God who have perished in the midst of pagans, worldlings, and scoffers and in that circle of protection knew that they were still being called by name even in the last gasp of death? Many of the children of God believe that now the woes and terrors have multiplied so far that the kingdom of God is about to come. Is not this intensified expectation of the end itself an evidence of how God's rule grows mighty in the midst of terrors and makes men lift up their heads "because their redemption is drawing near"? *The greatest mysteries of God are always enacted in the depths*; and therefore it is the cry from the depths that always has the greatest promise.

May I tell you how I myself have come to feel and experience the reality of God's rule in these days of catastrophe, to feel it in all its mysterious hiddenness, and also in that hiddenness which is so oppressive that it almost reduces one to despair? At a time like this how can one speak at all except through personal witness and confession?

I have known moments—like everybody else—in which discouragement crept into my heart and I felt utterly stricken. My work in Stuttgart seemed to have gone to pieces; and my listeners were scattered to the four winds; the churches lay in rubble and ashes. On one occasion when I was absorbed in these gloomy thoughts I was looking down into the concrete pit of a cellar which had been shattered by a bomb and in which more than fifty young persons had been killed. A woman came up to me and asked whether I was so and so, since she was not sure who I was in the clothes I wore. Then she said, "My husband died down there. His place was right under the hole. The clean-up squad was

unable to find a trace of him; all that was left was his cap. We were there the last time you preached in the cathedral church. And here before this pit I want to thank you for preparing him for eternity.”

All of a sudden God had opened a door to his kingdom in the moment of catastrophe and in the midst of the collapse of the personal worlds of two persons. There it was between that woman and myself. I could not express this at the time, of course, because the words simply did not come to me. There are moments when we become speechless children. And God can take our very lack of words and make of it a praise.

*That's how God can comfort; that's how he can let his kingdom come.*

So God's kingdom really does come in all secrecy and hiddenness. Is there any more hidden setting than a bomb crater which is the grave of so many hopes, and also seems to be the grave of so many promises? God builds his kingdom in secret. It is like the building of a bridge that goes on beneath a covering of scaffolding, so that we cannot see the bridge itself, and we hear only the drumming of hammers. But one day the scaffolding and planking is removed and the bridge is revealed to our wondering eyes. God was not idle while we were looking in vain for the signs of his footsteps and his work.

But one day the hiddenness will be removed and the wonder of the works of God, the wonder of his dominion will be spread out before the eyes of all. Now God's rule is hidden beneath the Cross, and only he who accepts the Cross knows the secret. (What could you do with that bomb crater without the Cross?) But one day it will be made manifest and every knee shall bow—whether men fall to their knees in adoration or whether they are forced to their knees by the power of the Lord whose glory can no longer be overlooked. The moment will come when God will be “all in all.” And that moment comes at the end of that hidden

and seemingly tortuous road of the Cross where God seems to be nothing at all. This is our comfort in all our confused journeying—that it ends in glory.

Joseph Wittig once said that a man's biography should begin not with his birth but with his death. For a man's life is revealed only by its end, its goal. In exactly the same way it can be said that the secret of history is revealed only as we see its end. Actually, this is the way the Scriptures look at the history of the world; even though the first pages of the Bible start out with the very beginning of creation, they already include the end and the goal. For the intent of these pages is not to disclose where man came from but where he is going; their purpose is to outline the plan that God has for us and all the world. Therefore the real book of the secret of history is the Revelation of John. There the course of the world is revealed as seen from its end; there it ends in songs of angels and the redeemed; there the kingdom has come in all its fullness and immensity.

Already we are living in the name and the promise of that end; the lights of the harbor are shining in the distance, and we dare not think that God's little ship will ever go down before it reaches its destination. And while the angels are singing their praises, because the kingdom of God is in motion, it comes to us with power—to us who dwell beneath the angels' praise. Therefore: "Look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."